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Intersections of silence and empathy in heritage practice

This special issue examines and fosters dialogue about silence and empathy as practices or consequences of historical interpretation; specifically the methods, discourses, representations and architectures of knowledge within which silence is called forth and understood as a process of memory, and its potential to elicit or foreclose empathy. We believe that current awareness – amongst heritage practitioners and academics – of differing disciplinary, geographical and institutional conceptions of silence needs to be heightened, and that a more robust discussion about the institutionalisation of both silences and empathy is long overdue. Within heritage practice, we find silence too often understood solely as the absence of sound or of voice, and empathy too often championed as an unqualified and ill-defined ‘good’. By crossing boundaries between research and practice, this volume explores the problematic of articulating silence and empathy as useful, harmful, or measurable outcomes of interpretive endeavour. We engage openly and critically with the complexities of these terms; the distinctions between ‘being silenced’ and ‘being silent’ (Fivush 2010), the limitations and manipulations of empathy (Coplan and Goldie 2011) and the creative – and political – possibilities of work at the interstices.

Empathy has been well-theorised within psychology and psychotherapy literature (see Haugh and Merry 2001 for an overview), and silence has been an emergent theme in that analysis. However, the relationship between these concepts has yet to be comprehensively studied from the perspective of heritage studies. Similarly, while the relationships between silence and text and silence and narrative have been stressed (Böhm and Bruni 2003; Erll 2011), heritage contexts cannot be reduced to either. As Rhiannon Mason and Joanne Sayner stress in the opening article of this volume, it is the specifics of sites such as museums (as media, representation and cultural practice) which give rise to certain, and multiple, kinds of silences. Museums and heritage sites are enmeshed in collective and personal memory construction and interpretation, yet how silences and empathetic experience manifest, interact with and cross-fertilise each other within such processes is less well understood.

There is no doubt that empathy still has currency as an affective device in the contemporary heritage landscape. Fesbach and Fesbach’s (2009) contention from just under a decade ago that empathy can increase our social understanding, lessen social conflict, limit aggression, increase compassion and caring, lessen prejudice, increase emotional competence, and motivate pro-social behaviour (that is, moral behaviours and altruism)

remains, for many, as persuasive as ever. It is thus unsurprising that those working in heritage contexts have embraced what we call strategies of empathy. Opportunities to meet and even 'become' characters from the various pasts being depicted are common. Some such moments are explicitly framed as calls to empathise; in participatory performances (as in the numerous Victorian classrooms in U.K. heritage sites), museums' digital games (Kidd 2015), or in opportunities to adopt a temporary persona for the duration of a visit (as at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum or the National WWII Museum, USA, or at Titanic Belfast, Northern Ireland). Empathy has been seen as a productive site of politics and justice (Clohesy 2013). Yet, the 'dynamics of empathy' (Katz 1963) that emerge within museums and heritage sites need more consideration (Kidd et al. 2014; Gokcigdem 2016). For example, what assumptions do such programmes make about the relationship between empathy, experience and comprehension? Does 'feeling' something (anything?) within these sites mean we are any closer to understanding? (Steyn 2014). Do our interactions and behaviours 'in the world' change as a result of our affective responses (for better, for worse)? There are other unknowns which follow from these observations: How likely an outcome is empathic accuracy, and how important is it? What are the consequences of 'failed' empathy? Is it possible and desirable to sustain empathy over time? (Howe 2013) How is empathy 'embodied'? (Cooper 2001) And do strategies of empathy require more 'ethical controls' than other methods because of their foregrounding of subjectivity? (Katz 1963) There are also limits to such practices: It is inconceivable that we would be encouraged to empathise with those who perform atrocious acts or whose actions are judged abhorrent by today's ('Western') moral standards. Indeed, 'empathy for the devil' (Morton 2011, 318) is a notable interpretive silence.

Despite, or maybe because of, their ubiquity, strategies of empathy in heritage contexts have been harshly criticized; accused of granting a 'self-indulgent sense of superiority in museum visitors' which does nothing to achieve the stated educational, ethical and political aims (Arnold- De Simine 2013). Such criticisms focus on potential dehistoricisation and the blurring of institutional power relations and social contexts (Steyn 2014). This volume seeks to explore such criticisms and to examine the extent to which constructions of silence contribute to, or alleviate, these.

The approach that authors take to intersections of silence and empathy depends of course not only on their understanding of empathy but also on the ways in which they conceptualise silence. Rhiannon Mason and Joanne Sayner open the debate by bringing together for the first time different ways of thinking about museal silences. They emphasise that different forms of silence can exist simultaneously and all are circumscribed by their internal and external surroundings. As such, certain moments of silence can open up possibilities for empathy while others hinder these. The articles in this volume span a similarly

diverse spectrum in the ways in which they approach silence.

Critics from heritage and museum studies have often emphasized processes by which voices become silenced during exhibition construction, with silence being seen as the result of 'hegemonic products' (Freeman, Nienass, and Daniell 2014, 3) and judged a 'means of social control' (Nakane 2007, 9). Silence then emerges as a thing political, unpredictable and shifting. Such critiques are important. Indeed, as Katie Markham suggests in this volume, it is sometimes the very strategies which aim to elicit empathy (often with concomitant attempts at representational polyvocality and a repost to certain forms of institutional silence) which in fact lead to empathy becoming a form of silencing itself.

In contrast, and working on the basis that some silences can be positive (as marks of respect, as spaces of thought and reflection), other contributors ask how institutions charged with interpretation of the past can more adequately create physical and metaphorical space for silence, and overcome their anxieties in relation to this 'universal aspect of human behavior' (Tannen and Saville-Troike 1985, xi). As such, they seek to confound what Jaworski has called the 'cultural valuation of noise over silence' (1993, 7). In different ways in this volume we find strategies of empathy drawing on the possibilities of 'being silent' (Fivush 2010). The authors examine shared and negotiated silences as related to voices, events, texts and objects (Bonshek 2008), seeing silence as more than merely the 'absence of speech' or sound (Saville-Troike 1985, 4) and rather as 'performative non-speech acts' (Winter 2013) and 'rich conversational and expressive resource[s]' (Adam 1997, 10). In this volume, Kyoko Murakami presents silence as itself a kind of dialogue, one that museums and heritage sites should learn to identify, to nurture, and to respect. In the liminal spaces of silence, Murakami argues, fixed heritages can be purposefully unsettled, and new meanings and identities begin to emerge. Murakami is one of several authors in this volume to address silence and diverse processes of 'unsettlement' (La Capra 2001, 41) and ask what their value is in different contexts.

Dennis Kurzon encourages us to explore the meaning of silences, noting that 'the central problem of silence in discourse is to discover that meaning' (1997, 5). Kidd's contribution investigates how embodied group encounters with digital heritage can create ambiguous elisions of silence and empathy, and unpacks what those mean to participants. Ambiguity here is understood positively, but it might also lead us to ask what the consequences are of 'failed' silences. As Adam Jaworski notes, 'silence can cause trouble, too' (1993, 4). Trouble of a different sort is the focus of Candela Delgado Marín's article. Marín introduces us to the works of feminist visual artists working powerfully with silence in their practice of producing disruptive 'countertales'. She advocates a fundamental, and positive, universality of silent, empathetic storytelling. Storytelling is also at the heart of Silke Arnold-de Simine's article. She examines the way in which narratives within a tourist attraction can 'transform silences

and unmetabolised affect' into empathy. Both Arnold-de Simine and Alexandra Woodall remind us of the imaginative investment made by visitors (with)in the silences they encounter at museums and heritage sites. For Woodall, whose contribution focuses on 'object dialogue boxes', silence can catalyse productive 'unknowing' and result in empathetic responses from visitors.

In sum, this volume begins to shed light on questions we might ask at the interstices of silence and empathy: Does silence (and, perhaps by extension, listening) make empathy better or more likely? How does the empathic silence work as an invitation to remember (for example in high profile acts of remembrance)? How do we communicate empathy, and what is the role of silence in that process? Under what conditions are silences meaningful, and/or useful? Do visitors to historic sites differ in how they deal with the silences they encounter? Do we have adequate methodologies to capture visitors' experiences of silence and empathic unsettlement? How can they be rendered as knowledge? Are collective or co-produced practices of silence more fruitful in encouraging empathetic engagement (or indeed, is the converse more likely)? Finally, importantly, in a context where many museum visitors prefer to remain within their comfort zones, does safety look like silence?

The contributions in this volume demonstrate that processes of silence are not easily reducible to simple dichotomies and that processes of empathy are not always predictable in the often limited physical and intellectual spaces carved out by exhibitions, and in the confines of the typical visitor performance. They therefore investigate different forms of silence and different types and registers of empathy and the interrelationships between them. Taken together, the contributions interrogate how contemporary conceptions of heritage allow for silence and empathy, linking them to the current emphasis on participatory work and many diverse mediations of the past, from the oral to the performative and the digital.

These issues are examined through different disciplines including Media Studies, Cultural Studies, Museology, History, Psychology, Theology, Philosophy, Anthropology, Sociology, Memory Studies, and Art Criticism, and through the voices of scholars from a variety of geographical contexts. The articles draw on a range of international case studies and, as Mason and Sayner argue, contribute to the nascent debate about the transculturality of silence within frameworks of empathy and memory (Erl [2016](#)).

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